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ABM Talks Test Soviets on Defense

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The core of the United States case in the secret American-Soviet talks designed to avert an antimissile race was spread on the public record Thursday.

No diplomatic ingenuity could prevent that. Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara's massive advocate's brief against early deployment of a multi-billion-dollar antiballistic missile defense system inevitably was aimed simultaneously against arguments raised in both the Pentagon and in the Kremlin.

For if McNamara loses the argument against opposing schools of thought in either place, his case must fall. Soviet emplacement of a major ABM system is virtually certain to trigger a counter American deployment.

But whatever comes of it, for the first time, the world's two super-powers, in the midst of supporting opposing sides in a war in Vietnam, are talking privately about what the McNamara brief described as the means required to destroy each other.

The United States concedes that it has at least a three-to-one advantage in intercontinental strategic nuclear forces over the Russians.

Even so, the Johnson Administration, without scuttling its force edge, believes there is a chance of convincing the Soviet Union, as McNamara put it, that there is "a mutuality of interests in limiting the deployment of anti-ballistic missile defense systems."

What is in it for the Russians?

Evidently enough to listen. But informed sources say that it may take months of exploration before there is any indication of the outcome.

Secrecy surrounds the conversations themselves. But the key elements in

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them cannot be hidden by diplomacy.

The talks have been conducted, so far, intermittently, primarily between Secretary of State Dean Rusk and Deputy Under Secretary of State Foy D. Kohler on one side, in Washington, and Soviet Ambassador Anatoly F. Dobrynin on the other. But other conversation between Administration and Soviet officials extend into the same area.

The principal argument on the American side for self-restraint in ABM deployment is waste—the waste of billions of dollars by both sides, "without any gain in real security for either side."

Is it conceivable that the Soviet Union could pledge public agreement with the United States on an issue so sensitive to its security, diplomacy, ideology and psychology as nuclear weaponry?

One answer could turn on a qualification contained in McNamara's presentation. He said, "President Johnson decided to initiate negotiations with the Soviet Union" designed to achieve "formal or informal agreement" to "limit" the deployment of ABM systems.

It is, therefore, possible, and indeed most probable in the view of some experts, that the most that can emerge is a tacit, informal, self-enforcing agreement on limited ABM deployments, that each could "inspect" with reconnaissance satellites, for example.

Can the Russians have any prospect for reducing that lopsided three or four-to-one strategic advantage the United States holds?

This thorny and diplomatically sensitive question has one obvious answer—the "freeze" and cut back on the production of nuclear weapons that the United States has proposed. But that requires inspection

and verification on Soviet territory; and the Russians have always refused to take that step.

Are there other potential methods for policing an agreement that would permit greater balance in the size of American and Soviet strategic nuclear forces. Perhaps, the experts say, circumspcctly, avoiding any amplification.

What is unfamiliar to the general public is the overriding defense-mindedness of the Soviet Union in the nuclear age.

The Russians, particularly under Soviet Premier Khrushchev, acted as though they held nuclear supremacy. But despite American fears of a Soviet nuclear surprise attack, Soviet fears of an American first strike constantly have been much greater in Russia military

strategy, because of the continuing United States nuclear edge.

Soviet representatives, at Geneva and in other forums, have talked and bargained over offensive, but not defensive, weapons or strategies. The current diplomatic discussions indicate the first dent—how big remains to be seen—in that off-limits subject. These are signs the Russians may shift to the American concept that a powerful offense is the best defense.

Under the present Kremlin leadership, McNamara said, "the initial caution prevailing under [Party Chairman] Brezhnev and [Premier] Kosygin has given way to a more self-confident attitude at home and abroad."

There "is evidence," said McNamara, that "... the Soviet Union may increas-

ingly seek peaceful avenues of endeavor. . . . But the time is not yet, unfortunately, when we can view Soviet policy as benign."

American experts see possibilities that instead of launching into an all-out ABM race against each other, the United States and the Soviet Union may conclude it is to their mutual advantage to install defenses against a Communist Chinese nuclear threat.

The odds are against any form of agreement, tacit or otherwise, emerging from the American-Soviet talks. But even if the talks only extend jointly into the depths of the nuclear dangers that each side for years has been soul-searching on its own, they will record a novel break in the pattern of American-Soviet diplomacy.